

TO HELL AND BACK
Psalm 139:1-12
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

In Kurt Vonnegut's novel, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, an orphan girl is required to repeat an oath before her Sunday supper at the orphanage. The oath, which she had repeated "six hundred times before six hundred very plain suppers" said, in part:

"I do solemnly swear that I will respect the sacred private property of others, and that I will be content with whatever station in life God Almighty may assign to me. ...I understand that I have not been placed on earth to be happy. I am here to be tested. If I am to pass the test, I must be always unselfish, always sober, always truthful, always chaste in mind, body and deed, and always respectful to those whom God has, in his wisdom, placed above me. If I pass the test, I will go to everlasting joy in heaven when I die. If I fail, I shall roast in hell while the Devil laughs and Jesus weeps."
(see Robert Short, Something to Believe In, p. 79)

Many people want nothing to do with the God represented by that fictional, yet uncomfortably common, oath: nor the religion which talks about a God who operates in that manner. Vonnegut, who spends a lot of literary effort arguing with Christianity, believes that many people are, frankly, revolted by a religion so apparently heartless.

Yet hell remains part of our vocabulary, as a convenient expletive with which to punctuate a deeply felt sentiment, and as part of the rhetoric of our religion, its scriptures and its oldest creed. "He descended into Hell," we affirm when we use the Apostles' Creed. Hell remains part of the imagery of faith if not part of the geography. We do talk, at times, as if we believed there were a place, deep in the ground. And hell remains sometimes as part of our theology, our sense of balance and justice in the universe; a place, or at least a state of being, where the proverbial piper must be paid. Whether or not we actually believe it, is not altogether certain.

There is poetic justice to the idea of hell, to be sure. That there is a place where the evil will be punished, particularly the ones who "got away" with it during their lives, satisfies the elemental sense of fairness in all of us. We can hear a thousand theological arguments to the effect that God is not limited to our idea of justice and still devoutly love the prospect that somewhere, somehow, the scoundrels of this world will get theirs. Faith, to be sure, must make some accounting for justice. There must be an accountability, a responsibility within religious faith. I believe that it matters a great deal whether or not we are merciful, compassionate, peaceful, kind, and although my idea may be very limited, I believe that there is a divine justice which operates in a scheme of things. But I don't believe there is a fiery lake where bad people go.

Where did the idea originate? Contrary to the opinion of some critics of the faith, Christianity didn't think up the idea of hell. The Jews apparently believed something like it, for awhile at least, and before them the Persians. The historians tell us that the concept of a place where evil people are punished after death came from a Persian religion called, Zoroastrianism, and that the idea began to appear in Judaic thought about 100 years before Christ. The Old Testament word Sheol, which is often translated hell, actually means the place of the dead. It is a very old idea and it does not mean a place of punishment. In the New Testament, where the word occurs about a dozen times, most of them in Matthew, the Greek term is Gehenna, which is just one letter away from Gahanna, a fact which vexes anyone who knows a bit

of Greek and drives through the pleasant town nearby. Gehenna, I am told, is the Greek form of the Valley of Hinnom which is a place, a few miles southwest of Jerusalem. Long before Christ, in the days of Ahaz the King, some particularly repugnant pagan rites took place in the Valley of Hinnom. When the reformer King, Josiah, took office, he cursed the Valley of Hinnom which became, thereafter, the city dump. It was, I am told, the public incinerator, in Jesus' day: a fire smoldered constantly a pall of evil-smelling smoke hovered over it, refuse decomposed there. It was a very unpleasant place, a graphic and powerful illustration of evil incarnate. (Interpreter's Bible; William Barclay, Daily Study Bible; Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible.) When you encounter the word hell in the Gospels, think about the Valley of Hinnom, because that's what the word pointed to.

In the Apostles' Creed, the phrase "He descended into Hell," carries absolutely no connotation of evil, punishment, suffering. The writers of that statement of faith were not saying that Jesus had to go to hell to pay for his sin. The "descent into hell" is the creedal way of saying that Jesus really died, that he experienced the totality of human experience, including its ending, its encounter with Sheol, the place of the dead.

Robert Short, in a very lively book, Something to Believe In, devotes a lot of space to the topic. Short believes the idea of hell as a place of eternal damnation is a monstrous misunderstanding which Christianity has suffered almost since its beginnings. He writes: "It is almost impossible for anyone to conceive of the troubles this idea has wreaked on the world....The teaching of a hell to come causes a hell on earth now." (p. 34). That may be an overstatement, and yet there are persuasive arguments. Atheism sounded like Good News to the people of the Enlightenment, Short contends, because the church had already consigned most of them to hell. "The threat of hell," he writes, "is what made the Dark Ages so dark." Belief in hell justified the Inquisition. If you believe that people who don't say the right words in their creeds or pray correctly, or eat wrong foods or whatever, will suffer eternally, the Inquisition actually looks like a very merciful institution. Heretics would lead many to stray from the true faith and, therefore, to end up in hell. Better to burn a few heretics now than to risk the eternal damage they would cause to the souls of others.

There is a sense in which belief in hell is still inclined to make religious arrogance and theological imperialism seem noble, brave. After all, if the stakes are eternal torment, one can overlook a little zeal, a bit of immoderation, intolerance or fanaticism.

Martin Luther, by the way, seems not to have believed in hell. He wrote, "I think very little of the idea that there is supposed to be a special place where the damned souls are now as the painters portray it and the bellyservers preach it." * Luther knew intuitively that if you can convince people that there is a hell, and that you not only know the way to avoid it, but are the way, you will have unlimited power over those people. Fire breathing evangelists know that truth instinctively. When Billy Sunday preached, it was said, you could feel the flames licking around the legs of your chair. *(He Descended into Hell, The Christian Ministry, January 1982) Mark Twain loved to torment sensitive, thoughtful Christians with the idea. "Most Christians who think they believe in Hell can sleep at night for only one reason," he wrote. "It is because the Christian does not believe it in his heart, but only with his head. The heart could not bear that burden." (Short, op. cit., p. 253)

If most of us can't, won't and don't believe in the classic version of hell as a place of eternal torment, why don't we muster the courage to rid ourselves of the doctrine as useless baggage? The reason is, I believe, that there is meaning left in

the idea and that the whole truth about the human condition is not described without something very nearly like a hell,

Hell, I would submit, is a useful metaphor for human evil. We have an unfortunately earned reputation for naivete in the market place of ideas. Religion, tragically, is regarded as "unreal, softhearted and soft headed:" religious people are regarded as hopelessly optimistic to the point of irrelevance about human nature. I am convinced that part of the reason religion is humbled to the point of invisibility on the university campus, is a perceived unwillingness, or incapacity to take evil seriously. David Read wrote recently, "More than ever we need a religion that reckons with a dangerous world and doesn't turn a blind eye to the viscious and violent streak in human nature. Hell," he continued, "is one short word to cover the dark side of human experience." (Unfinished Easter, p. 90)

French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre popularized the sentiment that, "hell is other people." More immediately, American author John Updike, commenting on his own religion, wrote, "I call myself a Christian by defining a Christian as a person willing to profess the Apostles' Creed.....The Creed asks us to believe not in Satan but only the Hell into which Christ descends. That hell, in the sense at least of a profound and isolating absence, exists, I do not doubt: the newspapers give us its daily bulletins." (David Read, The Faith Is Still There, p. 54)

I know the topic is unpleasant, particularly on a beautiful spring morning, and I am aware that you get tired of being reminded about it, but the newspapers this week reported the observation of the Holocaust throughout the world. And for those with the courage to confront that, that incredible evil human beings crafted on earth, hell is no euphemism, nor no primitive myth.

I know the topic is unpleasant, and that you are weary of hearing about it, but if we do militarily what we are prepared to do, by intent or by accident, by striking first or striding in response, the Holocaust of the 1940's will seem a picnic by comparison. "A Republic of Insects and Grass" is the title of the first section of Johathan Schell's book, The Fate of the Earth, published in three parts in The New Yorker earlier this year. "Insects and Grass" will survive, alone. The scientists know that. It really won't take much of an exchange to rupture the system, so that the birds are gone and the mammals and only the insects and grass are left. Hell, I would submit, is no euphemism. And a religion which ignores it; a religion which confines itself instead to uplifting homilies on positive thinking, human perfectability and social progress, while popular with those who can afford to think about those things, is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord, dishonest in a basic way and irrelevant.

We don't rid ourselves of this primitive doctrine because it is a useful way to talk about the dark side of the human condition. It also remains a striking way to talk, theologically, about Jesus Christ, which was its original intent. The phrase got in the Creed, in the first place, to punctuate the humanity of Jesus. Some of his early followers had trouble with his humanness. He only seemed to suffer, they said. God's son wouldn't be vulnerable. God wouldn't take that on himself, they said. Surely he didn't die, like a human being. And so the theologians put it in as plainly and strongly as they could - "He was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell." - They meant he died - and something more. They meant to say that Jesus knew what it means to be separated from God.

The theologians, the mystics, the poets, the artists have always known that hell has something to do with God's absence. That elite and sensitive company has always known what the rest of us only occasionally see, and that is that hell really is a

state of affairs from which God is excluded, shut out - or from, which he has excused himself. Hell is wherever God isn't.

Hell is ugliness and cruelty and unkindness. But hell is, ultimately and profoundly something like being utterly alone; something like the alienation the philosophers discuss and the psychiatrists analyze and the writers celebrate. Hell is either being cut off from everybody who cares about you, or feeling like you are cut off, which is the same human experience. Hell is that crisis of isolation when an individual feels that God, if there is a God, has abandoned him to aloneness. Hell has never been more eloquently defined than by the man who lived, truly, for others; who loved honestly and strongly and taught that God's kingdom is coming with peace and joy and acceptance for all and who was not simply misunderstood but crucified by people who understood him quite clearly. Hell is nowhere defined more adequately than by the one who felt drawn to the deepest commitment and most radical obedience to God and realized, slowly, that God, in spite of his faith, was not going to deliver him. Hell is nowhere more passionately witnessed than by the one who, from the cross, called out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

That is a hell we have experienced. The hell of abandonment is where we are when we hear our own voice asking, "Why me? Why this? Why, dear God, is this happening to me? -- Why have you abandoned me?"

The most important affirmation we Christians make about Jesus is that he knows what that human experience feels like. And the most important, most radical affirmation, we can make about God is that in Jesus, somehow God experienced that particular hell.

"He descended into hell." "That," William Stringfellow once wrote, "is very cheerful news. There is nothing less than Hell that is unknown to him. There is nothing I have known this side of Hell that is unfamiliar to Him."

(A Private and a Public Faith, p. 69)

It is, finally, the best of all news: the saving news. In Jesus Christ, God has experienced the fullness of our humanity. God, in Jesus Christ, has been to hell and back.

It is what we continue to celebrate in the Season of Eastertide. Listen, in conclusion, to the voices of others, struggling for words big and joyful enough.

Martin Luther could be ponderous at times. But on occasion he chose to be almost playful. He chose the most serious of topics, of course, which are somehow more adequately treated with a bit of whimsy. In a sermon he preached on the descent to hell, the most ponderous of topics, in 1533, he said,

"Jesus went in and captured the colors like a conquering hero, flinging open the doors and rummaging around among the devils so that one fell out a window and another through a hole in the wall."

(The Christian Ministry, op. cit., January 1982)

Updike, having testified to the reality of hell, concludes: "My sense of things, sentimental, I fear, is that wherever a church spire is raised, though dismal slums surround it, and a single dazed widow kneels under it, this Hell is opposed by a rumor of good news."

St. Paul, of course, said it best: "there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God, nothing in the past, present or future, not even our own death." But for beauty, for timely images I can recall whenever I need them;

for historical depth because it was written centuries before Christ, yet in images which have taken shape in my own life and the life I see in others, I prefer the Psalmist. ---

"Whither shall I go from thy Spirit
Or Whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend to heaven thou art there.
If I make my bed in Sheol,
Thou art there!
If I take the wings of the morning
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there thy hand shall lead me
And thy right hand shall hold me."

AMEN.

Gracious God, in love you created us and in love you live with us across the years, sometimes following from a distance, sometimes leading, but always present. Teach us, O God of love, to live without fear, in the knowledge that there is nowhere we can go without you: In Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.